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ABSTRACT

A recently desegregated high school student subsystem in a Deep South urban center is examined in this paper. It was found that although court ordered desegregation paired two high school populations, it did not effect racial boundaries. The whites, largely because they had been attending the school prior to desegregation, have been able to maintain their control over many student activities. As the blacks have taken over areas such as sports and cheerleading, the status of these has been refuted by whites. In areas such as student government, clubs, ROTC and the yearbook, the whites have been able to control these organizations and most of the activities sponsored by them. This control, for the most part, has come through the rigid maintenance of the boundaries separating blacks and whites. Students crossing these boundaries have been sanctioned by their own groups. These findings are analyzed by a model for desegregation similar to that of Barth's, where ethnic groups attempt to manipulate rewards and resources and yet protect boundaries. (Author/GC)

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RECONSTRUCTING A HIGH SCHOOL SOCIETY AFTER COURT-ORDERED DESEGREGATION[1]

By

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines a high school student subsystem in a Deep South urban center undergoing adjustment to recent court-ordered desegregation. Although the school's administration and academic subsystem have made major changes, the student subsystem is unique offered the fact that the two racial groups developed a new order where traditional segmentation was cross-cut by new ethnic lines. This paper presents a model for desegregation similar to that of Barth's where ethnic groups attempt to manipulate rewards and resources and yet protect boundaries.

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Introduction

In 1972 the Federal District Court ordered the Memphis City Schools to desegregate. The reaction in the white community was expectably negative. Although the parents were nonviolent, they reacted swiftly and withdrew nearly 40,000 white pupils of a population of nearly 120,000 to private academies. In the past five years the system has been attempting to recover from this loss and to make every effort to stabilize the social relationships of those students remaining in the system. During the past two years (1975-77) the processes of desegregation has been documented by carrying on an ethnographic field study of one racially balanced (60% black, 40% white) high school (population 500) within the Memphis system. The purpose of this paper is to report the extent to which the court decision has affected new social relationships between black and white students in this Deep South high school and describe how racial boundaries are maintained.

Generally the data support the proposition by scholars such as Burnett (1969), Kimball (1974), Scrupski (1975), and Waller (1965) that a school system is crosscut by at least three subsystems: the administrative, the academic, and the student. Using observational and interview techniques each of these subsystems were analyzed. Only the student subsystem will be described in this paper.

By way of background, the target school, Crossover High (CHS) was conceived in the old segregated system as an institution to train college-bound youth from upper income residential areas.[2] In September 1972 it was paired with a segregated black school, Feeder High located a few blocks away in an enclaved black blue-collar neighborhood. As was

the pattern throughout the South, the black school was converted to a junior high and the students ordered to attend Crossover.

Rather than discribing cultural or sub-cultural factors conflicting in the student subsystem, this paper will focus on those boundaries separating the races. As Barth (1969) and others have found, by contrasting boundaries, it is possible to gain ". . . a recognition of limitation on shared understanding, differences in criteria for judgement of value and performance, and a restriction of interaction to sectors assumed to be of common understanding and mutual interest" (Barth 1969:15). Thus an emphasis upon boundaries enables a fresh approach to race-social class dialogue since the goal is not to assess the relative effects of each, but to understand the interaction of ethnicity and stratification processes.

As important as academic achievement may be considered by all of these subgroups, extracurricular activities become the chief focus of a great deal of effort and manipulation by students (Burnett 1969). These activities are an important source of reward and self esteem in which the participants invest a considerable amount of time and effort. As Scrupski (1975:165) reasons:

> That adolescent peer groups would exist without the institution of extracurricular activities is certain. However, it seems almost equally certain that these activities give added visability to those who participate, indeed, allow a distinction to be made between those who do and do not participate and in that the activities tend to be ranked with respect to prestige, affect the sociometric standing of participants and nonparticipants.

At the outset the original students at Crossover had an early edge in the beginning of desegregation; they knew the territory. There was a clique of students who had been together from first grade and

they were well organized. Even the white students who arrived from a different junior high school had difficulty gaining any prominence in the subsystem. This group was referred to as the "Crossover 12 year club" by the outsiders. If white outsiders had trouble, this group made it especially difficult for the Black students. The "12 year club" would simply select only those students who fitted their image and could be shaped into defending the status quo.

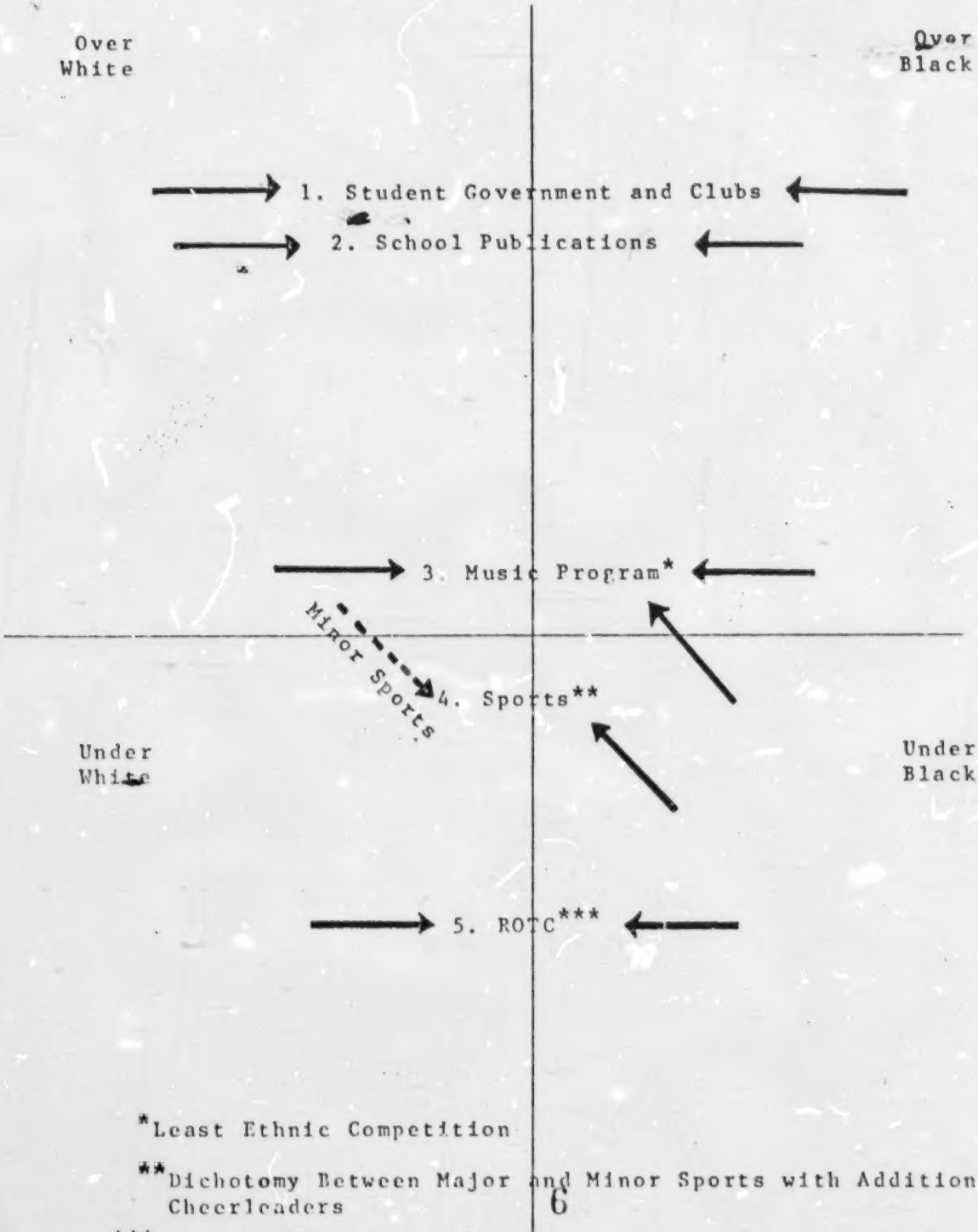
When the pairing began most of the white students then in school opted to stay rather than transfer to a private school. It was the group of junior high students who were bussed to the Feeder Junior High that left the system. By the end of the 1975 academic year when this research project began, this 12 year club was graduated. From 1975 on, the white school population declined rapidly each year, indicating that all but those who were dedicated to desegregation or too poor to afford private school had left the public school system rather than attend the formerly all Black school of Feeder. Thus, it must be kept in mind that this description of competition in extracurricular activities has continued to evolve in favor of the Black students as they have expanded numerically over the whites (from roughly 50-50 in 1972-73, to 72% Black, 28% white in 1976-77).

The formal organizations and activities analyzed here are sports and cheerleading, student government and clubs, music, band, ROTC and school publications. Each activity area has a separate set of rules and is assigned varying degrees of prestige in the system. A schematic presentation is affixed on the following page.

Administrative Subsystem

Research Model of School Student Subsystem

Academic Subsystem



*Least Ethnic Competition

**Dichotomy Between Major and Minor Sports with Addition of Cheerleaders

***Activity with Greatest Potential for Racial Violence

Sports

The most important student activities in terms of prestige and status position are focused on and around the sports teams and inter-high school competition, particularly football and basketball. Related activities are cheerleading, homecoming acitivities such as the selection of a homecoming queen and her court, dances and fund raising. Crossover High School was no exception. Before Crossover was paired with Feeder School its athletic achievements were limited but nevertheless games were well attended and teams were particularly well funded by the adult community through direct donations. On the other hand, at Feeder High School, athletic teams received support and a great deal of attention was focused on those individuals achieving athletic success. Feeder School had an active parent booster club, and the Black adult community took pride in the fact that this small school was able to produce state level championship teams on a regular basis. Basketball and football teams provided the community with a great deal of community entertainment, pride and identity.

Immediately after the two schools were paired, the new combination of athletic talent produced outstanding football teams. This provided both the white and Balck students with some identity in Crossover. However, as white athletes became less prominent as standout players, "making the team" became less important. Only those who could achieve regular starting position would remain on the team after the first few days of each season. By the 1975 season there were only three white students out for football, all of them in regular positions. In 1976 the entire team was composed of Black students. Basketball was controlled by Black athletes from the beginning. The white students

who could compete in these sports opted to participate on all white church sponsored teams in the City Park League.

The athletes would never discuss openly why they chose not to play for their high school--usually they gave a weak excuse to the coaches that they had jobs or were busy with school work. Privately they stated that "if you're the only white on the team it just isn't any fun. The Blacks play a different type of basketball. They do not learn to play as a team. All they want to be is a pro and make the bucks, the stand-out star. They talk about being a pro all the time." The white players who played on the 1975 football team would interact with other players only in practice or during games. When off the field or even taking a break during practice they usually stood with their own racial group.

Given this change in composition of the team, the white students say outright that they cannot identify with the teams and now consider major sports "a Black thing". As one stated, "there isn't anyone I can identify with." In the same manner, neither the Black nor the white community identifies with the new situation. The Black community, almost from the start, considered the loss of their Feeder School a critical setback and a loss to community life. Crossover was simply dismissed as "the white school, not theirs." Moreover, white business and community leaders stopped attending games. Private contributions fell off to zero. Immediately after pairing the two schools one white businessman informed the principal of Crossover that although he had given $2,000 to the teams in the past, he would only be able to contribute $200 in the future. The principal refused the offer out of pride. Attendance at football games over the last two seasons has run from roughly 400 on a good night to

maybe 40 or 50 persons, depending upon the opposing high school. Since the athletic program is supported directly from the gate receipts and from outside contributions, this change of events left the coaches and the athletic director with little option but to scrape for additional funds in many directions. Fund raising is centered around after game dances and selling candy during and after school. This latter task took more than a small amount of their effort to keep the program functioning.

White students simply withdrew, for the most part, from attending athletic events. During basketball games it is unusual to have as many as 10 white students. Generally only twenty or twenty-five white students attended football games. The removal of local status of sports, did not, however, reduce competition in activities associated with games. The 12 cheerleading positions were divided equally between white and Black girls through 1976. This balance was officially maintained by the first black principal to encouraged "good race relations." But never the less, the Black girls for most of the first four years tended to have lighter skin and straight hair. The choice of cheers or yells was evenly balanced between Black and white styles. When a new principal took over the high school, the recommended "balance" was discontinued as an official policy. Hence, only two white girls out of the twelve were selected for the squad. When they were informed by the new Black team captain that they no longer needed any "white type" cheers, the white girls quit the squad. Thus, the athletic teams and the cheerleading squad are now manned by the black students.

The football homecoming is a traditional activity in which many students are able to participate. A homecoming queen and five

female attendants are chosen by the athletic teams. In 1975 the white faculty sponsor of this event insisted that three of the girls be white and three Black. Again, when the policy of forced balance was discontinued, the Black athletes chose only Black candidates for homecoming queen.

White students remain competitive in only the minor spring sports such as cross country, golf, tennis, and baseball. Few Blacks are willing to compete here. Moreover, white boys have sought competition in the all white chess club. Thus, after five years the Crossover student body has sorted out the various sports-related activities for ethnic control.

Student Government and Clubs

The most intense area of competition between the two upper cells of white and Black students is over the elected offices of student council president and senior class president. In a recent survey of the entire district carried out for the Board of Education, white parents and students choose these student offices to be the most important status positions in the school. It was considered critical even to be associated with the students who held these positions. Although the white students at Crossover High have always been in the minority, they have effectively been able to outmaneuver the Blacks and to maintain control of these elected offices and many key elected positions in school clubs. It was only in the 1977-78 school year that a Black student was finally elected student council president. There are at least two reasons for the previous control by the white minority. First, the white students from the Crossover 12 year club were effectively organized. They knew when

to bring in certain Black students, to maintain legitimacy with the student body and school administration. Second, Blacks as a group hurt their own positions in obtaining these offices by not voting for Black students in the upper cell. This attitude may, in part, be a deliberate sanction by the under group Black leaders toward the upper group who they feel are either "acting too white" or who are in some way "copping out for a white thing." Black males who are capable and possess the leadership skills are aware of this attitude, and hence, are reluctant to put their names in nomination for the higher offices out of fear of being rediculed. As one put it, "If I ran for president, what would the (other) dudes say?" Thus, the more capable Black candidates did not run for office during the first four years after pairing. Black girls are less sensitive to this peer pressure and do become candidates, but they have only been successful in taking over the secondary positions such as treasurer or vice president or sergeant-at-arms. Black males express their attitudes about girls in these offices in saying, "They only screw things up." However, the overall explanation for this attitude can be attributed to the fact that most of the under-class Black males simply do not see any pay off, and hold little interest in these activities. Many feel the whites rig the election anyway, so why vote?

The whites have used the student offices to maintain control over activities they consider important. For example, the president of the senior class appoints the planning committee for the annual spring prom. This committee then selects the music group, which directly influences the style of music that will be played. Prom location also determines the accessibility by students. Thus, whether the prom will be accepted by either the white or the Black students is guaranteed by

the planning committee. Since Black students are not interested in white music, they refuse to attend or will leave the dance early.

In planning homecoming activities, they cater to white aspirations and activities. They try to maintain the traditions of the school "before it was desegregated." Until 1976, Black students were brought into these activities, but only as workers and not as decision-makers. When Black students fail to put forth the effort in decorating or other work assignments, they are chastised by the whites as being unwilling to participate in school activities or as not carrying the "proper school spirit." A Black girl was placed in charge of the prom committee in 1977 but she was one of the few who had attended Crossover elementary before pairing. Hence, she was held in high regard by the white leaders.

If the over-class Blacks participate in these school activities, it is necessary to cooperate with the over-class whites as a group. For those who are encouraged to participate, this encouragement is based on their committment to white group norms, i.e., clothing and hairstyles must be moderate, standard English must be used, and they need to show some aspirations for future achievement such as getting a college education. The Black students effecting these norms are included. Others who gain access to elected positions but are not willing to emulate these restrictions eventually become categorized as "deadwood" or "not caring." Moreover, students who do cross the boundary rarely gain access to decision-making.

Some Black students of the upper group have adjusted to these norms but are privately bitter about their high school experience. As one expressed it:

> After three years of this, I am just now learning how to deal with these tricky devils (white students). Even in petty things they will use trickery if need be to get their own way. The whites have taught me how to smile and at the same time be able to stick them in the back as they do me. I'm now able to play their game of smiling on the front and having no-good intentions in the back. I'm not bitter about desegregation, and I do not hate all white people. But it distresses me that they have to treat people like they do. Any time you get a white friend you just cannot trust them.

Student clubs that are sanctioned by the administration are similar to the student government in terms of participation. Where white students control, they promote activities which minimize paricipation by the economically poorer Blacks. Club activities such as over night trips are too expensive for Blacks for example, and quite often activities are deliberately held at night, sometimes in the homes of the white students to which most Blacks cannot obtain the necessary transportation. The Black students preceive these activities as a ploy to keep them out. At the same time, the whites are critical of the Blacks for their lack of willingness to participate in projects or shoulder responsibility.

In sum, the white students from the upper segments continued to control student government and many club activities, and hence, exercise an inordinate amount of influence over most student activities for nearly five years while they were a minority group.

Music Program

The music program is subdivided into band and choral groups, both with separate directors and sets of activities. In contrast to all of the other activities, the band appears to be a unique case in terms of student relationships. The band organization draws a particular type of student who sets himself apart from other members of his own ethnic

group and appears to be more genuinely interested in those who share his music experience. Although the members mix with students outside the program, relationships within the band are friendly and easy and, for the most part, without dissention. There always seems to be room for one more and the greater number insures continuation of the band program. The joking relationships and communication are different, and competition is minimal. Primary relationships are carried into other areas of interaction. For example, in the lunch room, the only racial mixing of tables on a consistent basis is done by band members. Students in one ethnic group readily accept members of the other group as leaders without any apparent signs of distrust or apprehension. Moreover, the band parents' association was, until recently, the only viable parent group willing to cross racial lines. As late as 1975, Black and white parents joined together in a fund raising activity to buy band uniforms. It is now defunct.

The choral group in the music program, however, has not achieved the same relationship. It is made up completely of Black students and is identified as "a Black activity" by the white students. Before desegregation, the Crossover High choral group put on an elaborate spring musical production rented from New York agencies, complete with elaborate costumes and scenery. This tradition has been discontinued in the past three years due to the lack of community support. Funding for this event depended on the number of tickets sold. Thus, performances are now limited to single or group performances by choral members. Community attendance is minimal, usually 300 as compared to the 2,000 tickets that would have been sold prior to desegration.

Students in the choral program are drawn from all segments of the Black student population; membership is only limited on the basis of vocal talent. However, the largest number of students come from the upper cell of Blacks, and most of these participate in a variety of other student organizations.

School Publications

An additional important status position for the high school is the school paper and the yearbook editorships and assistant editorships. These positions provide high status for students while in school, and greater mobility in the labor market in later life. In particular, participants determine what classmates will receive the most publicity, and thus the greatest validation of their campus popularity. The yearbook staff tends to be the most selective of the white upper group; specifically, they are the students who come through the accelerated track of the academic program. In the past two years, the editors have been the chief power brokers among all white students; for example, very few activities take place without their immediate involvement. Only those Black students who meet "high" standards are permitted access to the staff. The rest of the Black students see the yearbook as "a white thing" and choose to ignore it. Thus, the yearbook staff is hard-pressed to sell the requisite number of books to ensure its publication from year to year. A number of activities are held to raise funds and generally support the yearbook, but very few of these have much success.

The Black upper group has been able to gain control of the newspaper, but as they carry out the preparation of the prescribed copy

and editorial requisites of the administration, the Black staff members see that they are channelled into areas of interest specific to the upper white group. The under black and white students, again, choose to ignore this publication. Several have indicated they would like to see or read about themselves, their own network groups and what is going on about them. Thus, without the requisite sales, the school paper cannot be published. Hence, the number of editions has steadily declined each year until 1976-77, when none were published. The advisor explained, "No one was interested in working on the paper."

ROTC Activities

The ROTC program includes both boys and girls and represents a major focus of involvement for a significant percentage of whites from under-class families. These students tend to be drawn from that segment of the white school population which is the least competitive in the academic tracks. Their outside school orientation is distinctive from that of the over-class. It is not uncommon for them to wear hunting clothes and caps and to refer to themselves as just "good ole boys." Over-class students apply perjorative reference terms "grits" or "country" to these students. Several admit they only remain in the program to participate in the rifle matches. The rifle team is made up of all white students. The white students enjoy the company of the veteran army staff instructors. Both are rough talking, men-of-the-world, with backgrounds similar to the white under-class students. The teacher-student rapport in this situation is perhaps more intense and more satisfying to under white males than in any of the other high school programs.

For the Black students, ROTC represents an extension of the many credit course options to be taken in lieu of academic solids. As in other courses, the under Black male tend to ignore the instructors and pay little attention to the program. Cutting class is frequent, and not wearing the uniform when required is common. There are, of course, exceptions particularly among those students who see a career in the military as a viable option to the lack of opportunities in civilian life. An ROTC graduate can enlist in the army at the rank of Corporal, making it worthwhile for these students to strive for the promotions as cadet officers. But, thus far, no Blacks have been able to achieve the two highest positions of Commander and Executive Officer in the program. This imbalance may be due to the fact that ROTC is the last place where the under-white male is still in a competitive position. They compete vigorously for their rank in the program as a way of gaining prestige.

Racial mixing in ROTC carries the greatest potential for violence. Both the under-whites and the under-Black segments are socialized in acting out their aggression. Indeed, in a period of eighteen months, the only fist fights observed between Blacks and whites began with incidents in the ROTC drill sections and continued outside or in the halls later on in the day. In both cases the controversy started with a white cadet officer reprimanding a lower ranking Black cadet for not obeying rules and for "goofing off" in the ranks.

At times the racial interaction is amiable in the ROTC quarters, but the Black students are frequently on the butt-end of joking. It is not uncommon to hear such remarks as, "Stop picking the lint out of your hair and get to work." Outside the quarters, and away from the staff

instructors, the Black and white cadets are distant with each other. For example, there is rarely any verbal exchange in the halls and very little in the classrooms. When isolated by race the whites openly express their animosity toward Blacks, occassionally using the term "nigger" and quietly cursing desegration for having changed "their" school. In sum, the ROTC program is the only remaining formal activity in which under-class white students can assert themselves and compete for status positions with Blacks. The undercurrent of resentment toward Blacks by the whites in this segment is the most pronounced of anywhere in the school. It is evident that if the ratio balance were roughly even, the conflict would be more severe and open.

Conclusion

In summary, court ordered desegration paired two high school populations but did not erode the racial boundaries in the student subsystem. The whites, largely because they had been attending the school prior to desegration, have been able to maintain their control over many student activities. As the Blacks have taken over areas such as sports and cheerleading, the status of these has been refuted by whites. In areas such as student government, clubs, ROTC and the yearbook, although desegregated, the whites have been able to control these organizations and most of the activities sponsored by them. This control, for the most part, has come through the rigid maintenance of the boundaries separating Blacks and whites. Students crossing these boundaries have been sanctioned by their own groups. For example, only those Blacks who modify their style of dress, speech and general deportment are accepted by the whites. On the other hand, this modification is interpreted by other

Blacks as a "cop out" or, "acting white", and thus those Blacks who are accepted by the whites suffer from exclusion by members of their own ethnic group. Correspondingly, those whites who cross over the boundary in the opposite direction are denigrated by whites.

Therefore, what we have observed is a rigid boundary maintenance system between the two groups. As one insightful student observed, "Desegregation has only brought Blacks and whites together under one roof, but segregation remains." Had the school been able to hold whites, as Barth (1969) suggested, it might have changed the maintenance model to a generational one in which the Blacks and the whites in the two upper cells could have merged their boundaries to share the system of rewards and resources. But after five years the upper whites have opted to withdraw from the school as they have lost control of the student sub-system.

FOOTNOTES

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2. Crossover and Feeder are pseudonyms for the actual schools where the research was conducted.

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